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GRIZZLIES FEATURE NEW DEFENSIVE LOOK IN 1978

by

Bob Rosenthal

(This is the second in a two-part series on 1978
University of Montana football prospects.)

"Defensively, we'll be a lot stronger at every position. Our goal is to be the top defensive team in the Big Sky Conference."

University of Montana defensive coordinator Pokey Allen isn't setting unattainable goals with that statement. Last season Montana finished second to Northern Arizona in team defense and only two seniors are gone from the group.

Although the Grizzly defense is still relatively young, it has more experience and it features a new look.

For years, Montana has employed a 5-2 defense, but has now switched to a Pro 4-3.

"We just decided to scrap the 5-2 and use a Pro 4-3," Defensive Line Coach Gary Ekegren said. "Our personnel dictated that we make this change. We think it works better for us and we like it better."

Now, the 4-3 is a fixture. It features four down linemen, two tackles and two ends and three linebackers: two outside and one inside.

The defense is anchored by 1977 first team Academic All-American and second team All-Big Sky selection, senior Steve Fisher. Fisher (6-4, 235), a native of Missoula, has been moved from defensive end to tackle. Fisher is a strong candidate for All-America honors.

-more-

He'll be joined by sophomore Bret Barrick (6-5, 220) at tackle. The Lewiston product has improved tremendously in a year.

Walk-on Dan Scow, from Great Falls, played very well in spring ball and will see playing time this fall. Sophomore Arnie Rigoni has been moved to the defensive line from linebacker, but could also see some time on the offensive line.

Three players are competing for the two defensive end positions. Junior Sam Martin (6-4, 220) heads the list of players. Martin led the team in tackles last season with 89. Junior college transfer Marty Andrews (6-3, 235) and sophomore Brad Woodford (6-1, 210) are the other candidates.

"We've moved our bigger, stronger people inside and our quicker people outside," Ekegren said. "We must get to the football, and we feel this is the best way to do it."

Ekegren will also have three freshmen linemen from Montana. Ron Sharkey from Missoula, Dave Paoli from Great Falls and Pat Curry from Billings all join the fold in the fall.

Ekegren is quick to point out that all his returning linemen are 5 to 25 pounds lighter than a year ago. He feels that the loss of weight and addition of speed and strength will be a great benefit.

"We asked our players to drop weight and add strength through our winter weight program and spring football," Ekegren said. "With lighter, quicker people, we should be able to get to the football and make the play."

And that's what it's all about for Gary Ekegren's interior line.

The objective is no different for the linebackers: Get to the football.

The Grizzlies have several people displaying that ability.

Junior Kent Clausen (6-5, 230) is bigger, stronger, quicker and more experienced than last season. According to linebacker coach Pat Dolan, Clausen can play inside or outside linebacker. One thing is certain, he'll play. Clausen is an "A" student and a candidate for post-season honors.

Dave Gleason (6-3, 206) earned second team All-Big Sky honors last season. The junior from Missoula faces stiff competition at middle linebacker from senior Carm Carteri (6-2, 215), a starter much of 1977.

In addition to Clausen, there are four other strong candidates at outside linebacker led by second team All-Big Sky choice last season, senior Scott Morton (6-0, 200).

Juniors Barry Sacks (5-11, 175) and Jim Hogan (6-0, 200), and sophomore Mike Sloan (5-11, 200) had excellent springs and comprise a formidable group. According to Dolan, "This is the best group of outside linebackers we've ever had. Any of the five can start."

One freshman linebacker, Mike Carroll from Seattle, will join the Grizzlies in the fall.

Pokey Allen's secondary returns nearly intact from last season, losing just one player, Jeff Carlson, to graduation.

"The defensive secondary could be one of the strongest aspects of our team this season," Allen said. The player roster bears that out.

Junior Kelly Johnson (6-1, 190) from Great Falls returns to his spot at free safety. Johnson led the team in interceptions last season with six and was one of the leading tacklers for the Grizzlies.

Mike Johnson (6-2, 190) is the only senior in the secondary and appears to have the inside track on the strong safety spot. Johnson, (no relation to Kelly), suffered from injuries last fall and didn't see much playing time. However, he has come back very well and enjoyed an excellent spring.

Three juniors will hold down the two cornerback spots.

Greg Dunn (5-11, 179) has started at cornerback since his freshman year at Montana and continues to show improvement. According to Allen, Dunn is one of the top cornerbacks in the Big Sky. He's also an accomplished kickoff and punt return man. He was ninth in the nation in kickoff returns, averaging 25.4 yards per return in 1977. Dunn is also an excellent student.

Scot Ferda (5-10, 165) and Ed Cerkovnik (5-9, 160), both of Great Falls, have shown great improvement. Either could start and they could be used in the same secondary. Both played a great deal in 1977. Ferda is one of the fastest men on the club and appears headed for a good year. Cerkovnik, also extremely quick, intercepted four passes against Portland State last year. He could, however, see time at wide receiver. He's also an excellent student.

Another candidate in the secondary this fall is Jay Becker, a walk-on player last season who earned a full grant-in-aid for 1978. He can play cornerback or free safety. John Menke, a junior, walked on this past spring and showed great improvement. He'll be used at strong safety.

Freshmen, John Kovacich and Reed Madison from Butte, will be given an opportunity to crack the secondary.

"I think we're a lot stronger at every position," Allen said about the defense. "We've improved our pass rush, and I think we'll be very tough this season."

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